Cohabitation among Older Adults: Psychological Well-Being and Physical Health

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Background

- A large proportion of the older adult population is unmarried (Kreider & Ellis, 2011; Lin & Brown, 2012)
- Cohabitation is on the rise among older adults
- It is unclear how cohabiters compare to marrieds and unmarrieds on well-being

Previous Research

- Married adults have higher levels of well-being than the unmarried (Carr & Springer, 2010)
- Older cohabiters report more depressive symptoms than the married, but are similar to the unmarried (Brown et al., 2005)
- Previous work has not examined older cohabiters’ physical health

Gender Differences

- Men may enjoy greater benefits from unions than women (Bernard, 1972)
- Some research suggests few differences in union benefits by gender (Mazzaoli et al., 2007)
- Older cohabiting men report more depressive symptoms than married men (Brown et al., 2005)
  - No difference among women

Research Questions

- How do older cohabiters compare to continuously married, remarried, divorced, widowed, and never married persons on psychological well-being and physical health?
- Does the relationship between marital status and well-being differ by gender?

Data

- Data come from the 2008 and 2010 Health and Retirement Study (HRS)
- Analytical sample:
  - Interviewed in 2008 or 2010
  - Age 50+, nonmissing on DV and focal IV
  - N = 21,417 for depressive symptoms
  - N = 22,156 for self-rated health

Health Outcomes

- Depressive symptoms
  - 8 CESD items summed
  - Higher score reflects poorer well-being
- Self-rated health
  - 1 = excellent or very good health
  - 0 = poor, fair, or good health

Variables

- Independent Variable
  - Marital Status
    - Continuously married
    - Remarried
    - Cohabiting (ref)
    - Divorced
    - Widowed
    - Never married
- Other variables
  - Gender
  - Race/ethnicity
  - Age
  - Education
  - Employment
  - Assets
  - Religious attendance
  - Resident children
  - Health insurance

Results

- Not fully able to account for selection
  - Those with lower levels of well-being may be less likely to form and maintain unions
- Cannot capture those in dating or Living Apart Together (LAT) relationships

Conclusions

- Older cohabiters have similar psychological well-being and physical health as the married
  - Cohabitation may operate as a substitute for marriage
- Cohabiters have higher levels of psychological well-being than other unmarrieds
  - Only among men
- Physical health is similar for cohabiters and other unmarrieds
- Few gender differences in the association between marital status and well-being

Next Steps

- Examine receipt of care by marital status
- How is cohabiting associated with parents’ relationships with their adult children?
- Consider other health outcomes

Limitations

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